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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the initiatives of Tusculum College, Tennessee, to reverse a pattern of steady decline in enrollment, campus morale, academic standards, financial support, and institutional reputation. The tide began to turn when Tusculum, after a broad and inclusive search, hired its 25th president, Robert E. Knott in 1989. During his term, which lasted more than 10 years, Knott worked with the campus community to create a legacy of revitalization that steered the college on a positive course and continues to guide it in an innovative model of reform. As an early step in the revitalization, the faculty engaged in a year of strategic planning that centered on what made Tusculum different from other small liberal arts colleges. Working together, the faculty developed a civic arts initiative characterized by civic engagement, a core commons curriculum, a focused calendar, a competency evaluation program, and a civic arts learning project for each undergraduate that includes volunteer activities and service learning. As academic and governance reforms began to bear fruit, the college was able to focus on its fiscal situation to increase annual giving and renovate older buildings. A new president took office in June 2001. He sees as high mission the continuance of the revitalization, increased accountability, and the development of a system of performance assessment to meet the challenges of the future. The final section offers suggestions for "applying the case." (SLD)

POLICY PERSPECTIVES
September 2001

Exemplars

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Tusculum College

The Problem: ***Reverse a pattern of steady decline in student enrollment, campus morale, academic standards, financial support, and institutional reputation.***

The Solution: ***Unite faculty, staff, trustees, and students in a process to renew the academic and financial vitality of the college by focusing on civic engagement as the foundation of a liberal arts education.***

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In the late 1980s, Tusculum College was in trouble, and the danger signs were palpable. Almost every aspect of the institution had been affected by lingering decline: undergraduate enrollment in the residential program had reached a nadir of 220 students; faculty were among the lowest paid in the nation; and morale was dismal across the campus community. Operating deficits and a meager endowment only compounded the problem. Lacking dollars to restore its physical plant, the college had been forced to close three of its major buildings. Melinda Dukes, a professor of psychology at the college, remembers, "Buildings were boarded up. There was never money for anything. There was just no movement forward, and hadn't been for a number of years." In this environment, resources to maintain the status quo were scarce, while the notion of investment for improvement seemed all but impossible.

The tide began to turn when Tusculum instituted a broad and inclusive search process that yielded its twenty-fifth president, Robert E. Knott, in 1989. Over a term that lasted a decade, Knott worked with the campus community to create a legacy of revitalization that swiftly steered the college on a positive course and today continues to guide

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its steady climb from a campus in crisis to an innovative model of reform. The binding thread was what Tusculum came to call the "civic arts"—the creation of an environment that both practiced and promoted the skills, attitudes, and abilities appropriate to citizenship in a democratic society. At the core of this transformation was a commitment that faculty made to incorporate those democratic principles not just in teaching but in their interactions with one another as colleagues, as stakeholders in collegial governance, and as citizens of the larger community.

A curriculum focusing on citizenship, social change, leadership, and responsibility in a democratic society.

The Lessons of Leadership

"This was a very divided institution, a very alienated faculty," explains Jim Reid, a faculty member in political science. "The perception that the administration which preceded Bob Knott's did not believe in consulting with the faculty led to a tremendous rift." With a primary orientation as a faculty member rather than as an administrator, the new president's philosophy of leadership was to engage, not to direct. Having fully grounded himself in Tusculum's recent as well as distant past, Robert Knott knew that revitalizing the college required re-engaging the faculty.

Founded in 1794, Tusculum's original mission was to educate men and women in the liberal arts, nurture their talents and abilities, lay the groundwork for their chosen vocations, and encourage them to participate responsibly in the democratic communities of which they were a part. Reviewing the institution's history, Knott realized that its academic and financial difficulties were intrinsically linked, and the way to address both dilemmas was through a program of civic engagement that drew on the institution's traditional purposes and values.

To lend shape to this realization, the college engaged in one year of strategic planning to identify what distinguished Tusculum from other small liberal arts colleges. That image came into focus during a summer of frank, creative, and sometimes intense conversations among the college's 23 faculty members. During what came to be known as "side-porch conversations," which were convened on the porch of the president's home, faculty met for three hours twice each month to discuss at length the philosophical purposes of education. Reading a mix of classic and modern texts, they applied principles from that literature to reshape how Tusculum's undergraduate liberal arts curriculum might focus in practical terms on citizenship, social change, leadership, and responsibility in a democratic society.

Faculty deliberated every step in the evolution of the civic arts initiative—from the representation of academic disciplines in a core curriculum, to the nature of interdisciplinary courses, to competency systems for measuring student outcomes. "There was a growing realization that we were capturing a unique heritage," says Knott. "I had been working with college faculty for 23 years, and at first couldn't believe the consensus and speed we were able to achieve. Clearly, these were the faculty's reforms, and that's what made it work."

The open exchange of ideas generated creativity and decision-making, and it extended ownership of the reforms to the entire campus community. The willingness to engage in real change was evident in the fact that Tusculum faculty overcame the disciplinary fragmentation and contention that often stalls campus-wide initiatives. In this new forward-looking atmosphere, Tusculum faculty and staff embarked on two major transformations:

recasting the curriculum, calendar, and classroom based on the civic arts; and shifting their relationships with one another and with the institution in ways that manifested in practice the essence of their shared vision of a liberal arts education and of citizenship in a civil society.

Living Civic Engagement

Many institutions claim to teach civic values. Yet there are comparatively few that implement steps to impart these values to students beyond the ad hoc array of service learning or volunteer opportunities. The vision of a liberal arts education that emerged from Tusculum's side-porch conversations included a more deliberate and structured program to foster the development of civic values. Centered on the civic arts, democratic values would be applied equally in the administration, in the classroom, in students' experiences outside of the classroom, and in the governance of the institution itself. Tusculum sought to transform the learning environment—and indeed, the campus—into a model of a community.

For Tusculum, the term "civic arts" recaptures the original meaning of the phrase "liberal arts" as first used by Cicero, the Roman philosopher, teacher, and statesman whose native villa is the source of the college's name. Cicero's definition referred to those skills, attitudes, and abilities appropriate to citizenship in a democratic society, and Tusculum promotes these capabilities through a formal and comprehensive commons core curriculum, competency evaluation program, focused calendar, and civic arts service learning project. Majors also relate to the civic arts through coursework and field experiences that not only prepare students to function in a specialized area but also aid them in applying that knowledge in ways that contribute to the general welfare of the larger community.

Core Commons Curriculum. Students pursue the commons curriculum to provide an intellectual "common ground" from which to stimulate learning and discussion—analogous to the Commons of New England towns, which provided citizens an open space to gather, speak, and reflect on community concerns. The curriculum explores effective citizenship and ethical decision-making through courses such as "Our Lives in Community," focusing on the public and private roles of citizens, and "Athens to Philadelphia," on the evolution and growth of self-government in America. "Questions of our civic arts focus matured from the notion of having to develop a host of new courses to enveloping these values in all of the courses we already teach," Dukes explains. "We went back to the essence of the mission, finding ways to integrate it in every one of our commons courses—from statistics to rhetoric to history and sociology."

Addressing both academic and financial difficulties by engaging the institution's traditional purposes and values.

Focused Calendar. Tusculum undergraduates pursue courses through a focused calendar adapted from Colorado College. Each semester is comprised of four course blocks, and each block is three and one-half weeks long. Students take one course per block, eliminating the competition in effort that often occurs between classes. Because classes meet for an average of three hours daily, they establish a sense of familiarity among students that facilitates the exchange of ideas, transmission of knowledge, time for serious listening, and space for critical thinking. Faculty teaching roles change in many ways, including prompting students to connect subject matter more directly with their own lives and that of their communities.

Competency Evaluation Program. Modeled loosely on Alverno College's approach to evaluation and assessment, Tusculum's competency program ensures that graduates can demonstrate the ability to perform in areas considered to be important for effective performance on campus and later in public, professional, and private life. Students' skills and levels of achievement are continually developed, assessed, and documented in three competency areas: **Foundations**, which includes skills such as writing, reading, speaking, and critical analysis; **Specific Knowledge and Skills** in domains such as math, computer literacy, religious heritage, and scientific inquiry; and **The Practice of Virtue**, which consists of the abilities of self-knowledge, civility, and ethics of social responsibility.

Civic Arts Service Learning Project. Finally, each Tusculum undergraduate must engage in volunteer activities and service learning to gain practical experience outside of the classroom; to acquire valuable skills in leadership, group collaboration, and public problem-solving; and to gain experience within larger social contexts. Students progress along a continuum of increasingly in-depth service learning experiences, starting in the first year with community work and an All Campus Service Day, in which the entire campus volunteers at agencies and organizations across East Tennessee. In subsequent years, undergraduates pursue formal service learning through civic arts courses. According to Robin Fife, interim director of the Service Learning Center and a Tusculum alum, the college is currently developing a senior capstone experience that would synthesize students' experiences with the civic arts across their undergraduate careers.

The civic arts initiative was implemented across Tusculum's two schools—the Residential College, which provides a traditional undergraduate education, and the Professional Studies Program, which offers graduate and professional courses for adults. Although the intention was for both student bodies to pursue the same civic purpose and direction, Tusculum needed to implement the curriculum in different ways to address students' different needs. "We didn't force the Residential College foundation curriculum or schedule on adult students," says Knott. "Instead, we instituted a more applied dimension to adult courses." For example, the master's of education program builds ties with the community by placing master's students as teachers in surrounding public schools. Such an arrangement drew directly on the breadth of community and life experience that adult students, unlike traditional-age undergraduates, bring to the classroom.

Virtues of the Civic Arts:

- Embracing active and empathetic listening
- Presenting one's thoughts clearly in speaking or writing
- Analyzing situations carefully and solving problems creatively
- Consistently using the virtues embodied in the civic republican tradition for personal and public decision-making
- Respecting one's own cultural heritage and that of others.

Faculty Reformation

It was during the side-porch conversations that faculty not only forged this experiment in promoting democratic values, but also realized a dramatic recasting of their own roles in governance and the rules governing their relationship with the institution. Because faculty had taken ownership of the reforms themselves, unanimous votes were cast on all elements of the reform, including the civic arts project, the calendar, the curriculum, governance—and even the elimination of tenure.

"Faculty knew that we couldn't just talk about this, we had to live it," remembers Knott. "The votes on governance and tenure in particular were faculty-initiated. The conclusions simply occurred to faculty and made sense as they discussed the implementation of the vision we had developed." It was also an outgrowth of faculty's understanding of the institution's challenges, as well as the need to create incentives for innovation. A unanimous all-faculty vote replaced the tenure system with one-year, three-year, and five-year contracts with periodic evaluations. Peer evaluation teams serve a faculty development purpose, but behave less as a vehicle for evaluation and more as a venue for bringing faculty together to talk about pedagogy and provide support.

Expanded governance roles posed both challenges and opportunities. "It was a constant struggle of solidifying communication, of taking care of overlapping responsibilities to teaching and transitioning to the block calendar. It was a balancing act of keeping decision-making open to as many as possible but getting decisions made," says Dukes. But faculty were able to overcome these difficulties through priority-setting groups that would report on the progress of planning and implementation in respective committees. The full faculty met monthly to vote on positions and recommendations.

More recently, the governance structure evolved through the creation of a Residential College Council—a body consisting of all committee chairs, division directors, and the vice president for the Residential College to discuss strategic issues, including budgeting. "The original notion of self-governance dealt primarily with faculty issues, academic issues," explains Reid, who helped to engineer the change during his tenure as vice president of the Residential College. "It did not get into issues of strategic planning or how the college should establish institutional priorities with limited resources."

Hindsight and Foresight

If the devil is in the details, Tusculum found the process of implementation to be different from that of generating a vision. "Unfortunately, it's not like constructing a building, and there is never a one-to-one correspondence with what is put on the board during the development phase," says Dukes. But through persistence and dedication, the campus successfully instituted a mature, pragmatic fulfillment of the educational vision conceived in the side-porch discussions. What was still missing, however, was a promotion of the civic arts initiative in ways that secured the financial future of an institution with long-term debt and a deficit amounting to $5.7 million.

As the seeds of academic and governance reform began to bear fruit in 1991, the campus was able to focus on fiscal development. "It was an exciting time. We began to see resources available that hadn't been seen on campus in decades," says Knott. Financially, the college had hoped to reduce its dependence on gifts, and make tuition more of a central revenue stream. At the time of Knott's arrival, trustees had only contributed approximately $48,000 per year to the institution. As early as 1996, trustees were giving a total of $405,000 per year. By fostering strong ties with three primary constituencies—the trustees, residents of the primary region, and the alumni—the college was able to exceed the national average of annual giving only five years after the reform was initiated.

By the mid-1990s, Tusculum was able to build on its newfound financial stability, renovating major buildings. The physical enhancements were a telling sign of the deeper changes occurring within the institution. "When we re-opened an historic hall on campus, there was a faculty/staff workday effort to clean it up and begin the recovery and restoration," Dukes recalls. "There

was a sense of excitement from the very beginning to have everyone take part in the physical as well as academic transformation of the campus."

Beyond this sense of excitement, a number of tangible measures describe the extent of Tusculum's transformation:

- Combined enrollment in the residential and professional programs increased from 659 in 1989 to 1,681 in 2000.
- Endowment increased from $2 million in 1991 to nearly $12 million in 2000.
- The college completed two capital campaigns within a ten-year period. The first campaign, with a goal of $10 million was four times larger than any previous fundraising effort at Tusculum.
- Average faculty salary increased between 1989 and 1999 by 53 percent.
- Since 1991, the college has operated with a balanced budget.
- Seven major buildings on campus were renovated and major work accomplished on all facilities.

In addition, Tusculum has extended the reforms across transitions in leadership. After ten years of facilitating the civic arts reform, Knott moved on to accept a chancellorship at Mars Hill College. Tusculum's current president, Dolphus Henry, began his tenure in June of 2000. "The research I had done on Tusculum indicated to me its incredible potential," explains Henry, who has taken enrollment management, strategic planning, and outcomes assessment as the areas of focus for his administration.

The challenge ahead: performance assessment to document the full impact of the reforms.

While Henry intends to make his own mark on the institution by stressing accountability along these three dimensions, he has extended the democratic metaphor by continuing traditions initiated by Knott—a reflective leadership style and a continuation of the side-porch conversations. "I listened," Henry states simply, "to understand where the institution had been in order to help find a path for ensuring its future."

Henry's first tasks are to pursue outcomes-based performance assessment to determine whether and how the reforms are making a difference in the lives of graduates, with the goal of documenting the full impact of the reforms. "If we are truly committed to seeing this mission and approach in action, we need to consider what our students would look like if it worked," he says. "Linking our strategic planning with the outcomes of a Tusculum education in the civic arts is the first new step in that direction."

Applying the Case

In considering the range of actions Tusculum undertook and the degree of success it achieved, it is well to recall the advantage that smaller size confers. Anne Colby, a senior scholar at The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has studied Tusculum and other institutions to examine the impact of higher education on civic responsibility. "Tusculum's implementation of a civic engagement curriculum is unique," she says, "in that it arrived at a holistic, institutionalized, and fully integrated approach to the civic arts. Because the configuration is thoroughly integrated, it may not transfer easily to larger, more complex institutions."

In many ways, Tusculum enjoyed advantages that other institutions do not share: a small institution, a collegial and bucolic setting, and a highly committed faculty. The prospect of financial insolvency itself may have provided an important motivation for solidifying institutional resolve. On the other hand, Tusculum confronted change with a host of handicaps: an enormous

operating deficit, decades of neglect, and an erosion in enrollment that threatened to curtail the success of any bright idea. While some components of reform were unique to the college, there are many lessons that any higher education institution—even those in very different settings and with substantially different missions—can derive from its ability to make dramatic change in less than a decade.

Pursue leadership as a service, not as a position of status or power. Enduring leadership seeks to create a shared sense of ownership among all members of a campus community, so that the initiative itself outlasts the tenure of its leaders.

Engage the institution's own intellectual capital in reform efforts. The only way to achieve radical change in a college or university is first to cultivate faculty participation—creating the environment that allows faculty themselves to generate the creative ideas that guide the institution's direction. "The old saw is that American universities have the greatest minds in the world, but the managers of those institutions often do not call on the expertise within their midst to help guide the institution," says Reid.

Make democratic models of governance the walk—not just the talk. In coming to the Tusculum presidency, Robert Knott gained the trust of faculty not just by what he said but by the behavior he modeled in his style of collaborative leadership. "No matter how complicated it may seem, you must invite everyone to become a part of the conversation, so that even alienated members of your community feel that that their contribution makes a difference," he says.

Draw on an institution's unique heritage and setting when framing reforms. Leaders and campus partners should begin by exploring and developing a full and well-grounded sense of a campus's history. They can build on that understanding to shape the realization of a mission or educational purpose. According to Knott, "The mission shouldn't be a statement on paper, but something every member of the community internalizes and lives."

Focus on outcomes. Too often, institutions implement a vision without any real consideration of the outcomes a new program or approach will generate—or at least any solid plans for measuring those outcomes. When a debate becomes deadlocked, a campus community might well compile a list of the eight qualities it wants graduates to have, and build the reform around mechanisms for fostering those attributes. "If you can't agree on content," Knott suggests, "you can begin by agreeing on what that content should impart."

Institutional Profile:

Tusculum College
Private liberal arts college located in Greeneville, Tennessee
Number of undergraduate and graduate students: **1,681**
483 traditional students in the Residential College, and **1,198** adult students in the Professional College
Number of full-time faculty: **63**
Number of part-time faculty: **44**

Milestones:

- At the end of the 1980s, Tusculum College is in decline, with operating deficits, a low endowment, underpaid faculty, several closed buildings, low enrollment, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness.
- The arrival of President Robert Knott in 1989 heralds the beginning of an new, inclusive leadership style and the beginning of what will become a decade-long revitalization of the college.
- In a year-long effort, faculty members and the new administration evaluate the heritage and distinctions of the college and identify a "civic arts" emphasis for the institution, focusing on citizenship, social

change, leadership, and responsibility in a democratic society.

- In 1990-91, Tusculum pursues a "commons" curriculum, a competency program, and a focused calendar that allows concentration on one class at a time, and incorporates service learning into the curriculum. Additionally, the college initiates a faculty self-governance system.
- By 1991, Tusculum College launches a focus on fiscal development leading to, among other achievements, an increase in giving by the college's trustees from approximately $48,000 per year to more than $400,000 per year.
- By the mid-1990s, Tusculum is actively renovating and improving its physical plant, including the renovation and reopening of previously closed buildings. Seven major buildings are renovated and other major work is accomplished across the campus.
- In 2000, Tusculum College's enrollment in its Residential College and Professional Studies programs climbs to 1,681—more than double its 1989 total of 659.
- By 2000, Tusculum College's endowment rises to nearly $12 million, up from only $2 million in 1991.
- In June of 2001, Dr. Dolphus E. Henry takes office as the 26th president of the college, bringing to his administration a focus on enrollment growth and strategic planning.

Exemplars

Exemplars, a companion to **Policy Perspectives,** features profiles of colleges and universities making significant changes to their institutional cultures. **Exemplars** is supported by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and is a publication of the Knight Higher Education Collaborative.

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